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THE GERMAN NOTE
AND THE
REPLY OF THE ALLIES

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THE GERMAN NOTE
AND THE
REPLY OF THE ALLIES

Text of the German Note handed by the American Ambassador to Lord Robert Cecil, Acting Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, on December 19th.

Text and Translation of the Reply communicated by the French Government, on behalf of the Allied Powers, to the United States Ambassador in Paris on December 30th.

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THE GERMAN NOTE AND THE REPLY OF THE ALLIES

THE GERMAN NOTE.

“ Berlin,
“ 12th December, 1916.

“ Mr. Chargé d’Affaires :

“ The most formidable war known to history has been ravaging for two and a half years a great part of the world. That catastrophe that the bonds of a common civilisation more than a thousand years old could not stop strikes mankind in its most precious patrimony; it threatens to bury under its ruins the moral and physical progress on which Europe prided itself at the dawn of the twentieth century. In that strife Germany and her Allies Austria-Hungary and Turkey have given proof of their indestructible strength in winning considerable successes at war. Their unshakable lines resist ceaseless attacks of their enemies’ arms. The recent diversion in the Balkans was speedily and victoriously thwarted. The latest events have demonstrated that a continuation of the war cannot break their resisting power. The general situation much rather justified their hope of fresh successes. It was for the defence of their existence and freedom of their national development that the four allied powers were constrained to take up arms. The exploits of their armies have brought no change therein. Not for an instant have they swerved from the conviction

that the respect of the rights of other nations is not in any degree incompatible with their own rights and legitimate interests. They do not seek to crush or annihilate their adversaries. Conscious of their military and economic strength and ready to carry on to the end if they must the struggle that is forced upon them but animated at the same time by the desire to stem the flood of blood and to bring the horrors of war to an end the four allied powers propose to enter even now into peace negotiations. They feel sure that the propositions which they would bring forward and which would aim to assure the existence, honour and free development of their peoples would be such as to serve as a basis for the restoration of a lasting peace.

“ If notwithstanding this offer of peace and conciliation the struggle should continue the four allied powers are resolved to carry it on to an end while solemnly disclaiming any responsibility before mankind and history.

“ The Imperial Government has the honour to ask through your obliging medium the Government of the United States to be pleased to transmit the present communication to the Government of the French Republic, to the Royal Government of Great Britain, to the Imperial Government of Japan, to the Royal Government of Roumania, to the Imperial Government of Russia and to the Royal Government of Serbia.

“ I take this opportunity to renew to you, Mr. Chargé d’Affaires, the assurance of my high consideration.

(Signed) “ VON BETHMANN-HOLLWEG.

“ To Mr. Joseph Clark Grew,

“ Chargé d’Affaires of the United States of America.”

THE REPLY OF THE ALLIES.

Les Gouvernements alliés de la Russie, de la France, de l'Angleterre, du Japon, de l'Italie, de la Serbie, de la Belgique, du Monténégro, du Portugal et de la Roumanie, unis pour la défense de la liberté des peuples, et fidèles à l'engagement pris de ne pas déposer isolément les armes, ont résolu de répondre collectivement aux préputées propositions de paix qui leur ont été adressées de la part des Gouvernements ennemis par l'entremise des Etats-Unis, de l'Espagne, de la Suisse et des Pays-Bas.

Avant toute réponse, les Puissances Alliées tiennent à s'élever hautement contre les deux assertions essentielles de la note des puissances ennemis qui prétend rejeter sur les Alliés la responsabilité de la guerre, et qui proclame la victoire des Puissances centrales.

Les Alliés ne peuvent admettre une affirmation doublement inexacte et qui suffit à frapper de stérilité toute tentative de négociation.

Les Nations Alliées subissent depuis trente mois une guerre qu'elles ont tout fait pour éviter. Elles ont démontré par des actes leur attachement à la paix. Cet attachement est aussi ferme aujourd'hui qu'en 1914; après la violation de ses engagements, ce n'est pas sur la parole de l'Allemagne que la paix, rompue par elle, peut être fondée.

Une suggestion sans conditions pour l'ouverture de négociations n'est pas une offre de paix. La préputée proposition, dépourvue de substance et de précision, mise en circulation par le Gouvernement impérial, apparaît moins comme une offre de paix que comme une manœuvre de guerre.

Elle est basée sur la méconnaissance systématique du caractère de la lutte dans le passé, dans le présent et dans l'avenir.

Pour le passé, la note allemande ignore les faits, les dates, les chiffres qui établissent que la guerre a été voulue, provoquée et déclarée par l'Allemagne et l'Autriche-Hongrie.

A La Haye, c'est le délégué allemand qui avait refusé toute proposition de désarmement. En juillet 1914, c'est l'Autriche-Hongrie qui, après avoir adressé à la Serbie un ultimatum sans précédent, lui a déclaré la guerre, malgré les satisfactions immédiatement obtenues. Les Empires du Centre ont alors repoussé toutes les tentatives faites par l'Entente pour assurer à un conflit local une solution pacifique. L'offre de Conférence de l'Angleterre, la proposition française de commission internationale, la demande d'arbitrage de l'Empereur de Russie à l'Empereur d'Allemagne, l'entente réalisée par la Russie et l'Autriche-Hongrie la veille du conflit; tous ces efforts ont été laissés par l'Allemagne sans réponse ou sans suite. La Belgique a été evahie par un Empire qui avait garanti sa neutralité et qui n'a pas craint de proclamer lui-même que les traités étaient des "chiffons de papier" et que "nécessité n'a pas de loi."

Pour le présent, les prétendues offres de l'Allemagne s'appuient sur une "carte de guerre" uniquement européenne qui n'exprime que l'apparence extérieure et passagère de la situation, non la force réelle des adversaires. Une paix conclue en partant de ces données serait à l'avantage unique des agresseurs qui, ayant cru atteindre leur but en deux mois, s'aperçoivent après deux ans qu'ils ne l'atteindront jamais.

Pour l'avenir, les ruines causées par la déclaration de guerre allemande, les attentats innombrables commis par l'Allemagne et ses alliés contre les belligérants et contre les neutres exigent des sanctions, des réparations et des garanties : l'Allemagne écluse les unes et les autres.

En réalité, l'ouverture faite par les Puissances centrales n'est qu'une tentative calculée en vne d'agir sur l'évolution

de la guerre et d'imposer finalement une paix allemande.

Elle a pour objet de troubler l'opinion dans les pays alliés. Cette opinion, malgré tous les sacrifices consentis, a déjà répondu avec une fermeté admirable et dénoncé le vide de la déclaration ennemie.

Elle veut raffermir l'opinion publique de l'Allemagne et de ses alliés, si gravement éprouvés déjà par leurs pertes, usés par le resserrement économique et écrasés par l'effort suprême qui est exigé de leurs peuples.

Elle cherche à tromper, à intimider l'opinion publique des pays neutres, fixée depuis longtemps sur les responsabilités initiales, éclairée sur les responsabilités présentes, et trop clairvoyante pour favoriser les desseins de l'Allemagne en abandonnant la défense des libertés humaines.

Elle tente enfin de justifier d'avance aux yeux du monde de nouveaux crimes : guerre sous-marine, déportations, travaux et enrôlements forcés de nationaux contre leur propre pays, violations de neutralité.

C'est en pleine conscience de la gravité, mais aussi des nécessités de l'heure, que les Gouvernements alliés, étroitement unis entre eux, et en parfaite communion avec leurs peuples, se refusent à faire état d'une proposition sans sincérité et sans portée.

Ils affirment une fois de plus qu'il n'y a pas de paix possible tant que ne seront pas assurées la réparation des droits et des libertés violées, la reconnaissance du principe des nationalités et de la libre existence des petits Etats ; tant que n'est pas certain un règlement de nature à supprimer définitivement les causes qui depuis si longtemps ont menacé les nations et à donner les seules garanties efficaces pour la sécurité du monde.

Les Puissances alliées tiennent en terminant à exposer les considérations suivantes qui font ressortir la situation particulière où se trouve la Belgique après deux ans et demi de guerre.

En vertu des traités internationaux signés par cinq grandes Puissances de l'Europe, au nombre desquelles figurait l'Allemagne, la Belgique jouissait avant la guerre d'un statut spécial, qui rendait son territoire inviolable et la mettait elle-même sous la garantie des Puissances, à l'abri des conflits européens. La Belgique a cependant, au mépris de ces traités, subi, la première, l'agression de l'Allemagne. C'est pourquoi le gouvernement belge estime nécessaire de préciser le but que la Belgique n'a jamais cessé de poursuivre, en combattant, à côté des Puissances de l'Entente, pour la cause du droit et de la justice.

La Belgique a toujours observé scrupuleusement les devoirs que lui imposait sa neutralité. Elle a pris les armes pour défendre son indépendance et sa neutralité violées par l'Allemagne et pour rester fidèle à ses obligations internationales. Le 4 août, au Reichstag, le Chancelier a reconnu que cette agression constituait une injustice contraire au droit des gens et il s'est engagé au nom de l'Allemagne à la réparer.

Depuis deux ans et demi cette injustice a été cruellement aggravée par des pratiques de guerre et d'occupation qui ont épuisé les ressources du pays, ruiné ses industries, dévasté ses villes et ses villages, multiplié les massacres, les exécutions et les emprisonnements. Et au moment où l'Allemagne parle au monde de paix et d'humanité, elle déporte et réduit à la servitude des citoyens belges par milliers.

La Belgique avant la guerre n'aspirait qu'à vivre en bon accord avec tous ses voisins. Son Roi et son gouvernement n'ont qu'un but : le rétablissement de la paix et du droit. Mais ils ne veulent que d'une paix qui assurerait à leur pays des réparations légitimes, des garanties et des sécurités pour l'avenir.

TRANSLATION OF THE REPLY.

The Allied Governments of Russia, France, Great Britain, Japan, Italy, Serbia, Belgium, Montenegro, Portugal and Roumania, united for the defence of the freedom of nations and faithful to their undertakings not to lay down their arms except in common accord, have decided to return a joint answer to the illusory peace proposals which have been addressed to them by the Governments of the Enemy Powers through the intermediary of the United States, Spain, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

As a prelude to any reply, the Allied Powers feel bound to protest strongly against the two material assertions made in the Note from Enemy Powers, the one professing to throw upon the Allies the responsibility of the war, and the other proclaiming the victory of the Central Powers.

The Allies cannot admit a claim which is thus untrue in each particular, and is sufficient alone to render sterile all attempt at negotiations.

The Allied Nations have for thirty months been engaged in a war which they had done everything to avoid. They have shown by their actions their devotion to peace. This devotion is as strong to-day as it was in 1914; and after the violation by Germany of her solemn engagements, Germany's promise is no sufficient foundation on which to re-establish the peace which she broke.

A mere suggestion, without statement of terms, that negotiations should be opened, is not an offer of peace. The putting forward by the Imperial Government of a sham proposal, lacking all substance and precision, would appear to be less an offer of peace than a war manœuvre.

It is founded on a calculated misinterpretation of the character of the struggle in the past, the present and the future.

As for the past, the German Note takes no account of the facts, dates and figures which establish that the war was

desired, provoked and declared by Germany and Austria-Hungary.

At the Hague Conference it was the German delegate who refused all proposals for disarmament. In July, 1914, it was Austria-Hungary who, after having addressed to Serbia an unprecedented ultimatum, declared war upon her in spite of the satisfaction which had at once been accorded. The Central Empires then rejected all attempts made by the Entente to bring about a pacific solution of a purely local conflict. Great Britain suggested a Conference, France proposed an International Commission, the Emperor of Russia asked the German Emperor to go to arbitration, and Russia and Austria-Hungary came to an understanding on the eve of the conflict; but to all these efforts Germany gave neither answer nor effect. Belgium was invaded by an Empire which had guaranteed her neutrality, and which has had the assurance to proclaim that treaties were "scraps of paper" and that "necessity knows no law."

At the present moment these sham offers on the part of Germany rest on a "War Map" of Europe alone, which represents nothing more than a superficial and passing phase of the situation, and not the real strength of the belligerents. A peace concluded upon these terms would be only to the advantage of the aggressors, who, after imagining that they would reach their goal in two months, discovered after two years that they could never attain it.

As for the future, the disasters caused by the German declaration of War and the innumerable outrages committed by Germany and her Allies against both belligerents and neutrals demand penalties, reparation, and guarantees: Germany avoids the mention of any of these.

In reality, these overtures made by the Central Powers are nothing more than a calculated attempt to influence the future course of the war, and to end it by imposing a German peace.

The object of these overtures is to create dissension in

public opinion in Allied countries. But that public opinion has, in spite of all the sacrifices endured by the Allies, already given its answer with admirable firmness, and has denounced the empty pretence of the declaration of the Enemy Powers.

They have the further object of stiffening public opinion in Germany and in the countries allied to her: one and all, already severely tried by their losses, worn out by economic pressure and crushed by the supreme effort which has been imposed upon their inhabitants.

They endeavour to deceive and intimidate public opinion in neutral countries whose inhabitants have long since made up their minds where the initial responsibility rests, have recognised existing responsibilities, and are far too enlightened to favour the designs of Germany by abandoning the defence of human freedom.

Finally, these overtures attempt to justify in advance in the eyes of the world a new series of crimes—submarine warfare, deportations, forced labour and forced enlistment of inhabitants against their own countries, and violations of neutrality.

Fully conscious of the gravity of this moment, but equally conscious of its requirements, the Allied Governments, closely united to one another and in perfect sympathy with their peoples, refuse to consider a proposal which is empty and insincere.

Once again the Allies declare that no peace is possible so long as they have not secured reparation of violated rights and liberties, recognition of the principle of nationalities, and of the free existence of small states; so long as they have not brought about a settlement calculated to end once and for all forces which have constituted a perpetual menace to the nations, and to afford the only effective guarantees for the future security of the world.

In conclusion, the Allied Powers think it necessary to put forward the following considerations which show the

special situation of Belgium after two and a half years of war.

In virtue of International treaties signed by five great European Powers, of whom Germany was one, Belgium enjoyed, before the war, a special status, rendering her territory inviolable and placing her, under the guarantee of the Powers, outside all European conflicts. She was, however, in spite of these treaties, the first to suffer the aggression of Germany. For this reason the Belgian Government think it necessary to define the aims which Belgium has never ceased to pursue, while fighting side by side with the Entente Powers for right and justice.

Belgium has always scrupulously fulfilled the duties which her neutrality imposed upon her. She has taken up arms to defend her independence and her neutrality violated by Germany, and to show that she remains faithful to her international obligations. On the 4th of August, 1914, in the Reichstag, the German Chancellor admitted that this aggression constituted an injustice contrary to the laws of nations and pledged himself in the name of Germany to repair it.

During two and a half years this injustice has been cruelly aggravated by the proceedings of the occupying forces which have exhausted the resources of the country, ruined its industries, devastated its towns and villages, and have been responsible for innumerable massacres, executions, and imprisonments. At this very moment, while Germany is proclaiming peace and humanity to the world, she is deporting Belgian citizens by thousands and reducing them to slavery.

Belgium before the war asked for nothing but to live in harmony with all her neighbours. Her King and her Government have but one aim—the re-establishment of peace and justice. But they only desire a peace which would assure to their country legitimate reparation, guarantees, and safeguards for the future.

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